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ABSTRACT

While there exists considerable sentiment about the older urban areas of the United States, little empirical work dealing explicitly with the problems of these areas has been done. This study is a preliminary investigation into the use of urban age as an independent variable. Preliminary results indicate that: (1) racial transition is not related to urban age: (2) population decline is only weakly related to urban age: (3) wages and incomes are not related to urban age: (4) older cities do not have a higher percentage of employment in manufacturing compared to younger cities: and (5) there is little relationship between land area and urban age, while there is a significant relationship between urban age and population density. Thus older areas may enjoy certain economies of scale and agglomeration. These results signify that the economic health of older urban areas may be more robust than expected and that the myths of urban age are probably based on urban size or regional differences rather than on age itself. (Author/GC)

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URBAN AGE AND URBAN DECLINE*

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ABSTRACT

While there exists considerable sentiment about the older urban areas of the United States, surprisingly little empirical work dealing explicitly with the problems of older urban areas has been done. This study is a preliminary investigation into the use of urban age as an explicit independent variable. These preliminary results indicate that: 1) racial transition is not related to urban age; 2) population decline is only weakly related to urban age; 3) wages and incomes are not related to urban age; 4) older cities do not have a higher percentage of employment in manufacturing compared to younger cities; and 5) older cities are not more underbounded than younger cities. These results indicate that the economic health of older urban areas may be more robust than expected and that the myths of urban age are probably based on urban size or regional differences as opposed to urban age itself.

URBAN AGE AND URBAN DECLINE

A pessimistic caricature of older American cities exists in the minds of many. This popular caricature includes problems of decaying urban infrastructure, fiscal uncertainty, eroding tax bases, population losses, declining employment opportunities, and dependence on an economic base which stresses heavy industry.

The initial intent of this study was to empirically determine the nature and degree of urban decline. The results were counter-intuitive. It was expected that demographic, income and employment variations would represent symptoms indicating the "pathological" condition anticipated in the older urban areas of the United States. Indeed, it seemed that checking these vital signs of the older cities' economic health would would be perfunctory, merely a formality. Most academic diagnosticians have already signalled older American cities as in need of intensive care. Such is the power of myths.

In an initial search of the literature, surprisingly little empirical work dealing explicitly with the problems of older cities was discovered.[1] This dearth of information inspired a relatively inductive preliminary investigation into the use of urban age as an explicit independent variable in order to discern the specific socioeconomic characteristics of the older cities in the United States' urban system.

The popular sentiments about older cities are similar to those expressed about neighborhoods during periods of rapid expansion of black ghettos. The work of Laurenti (1960) convinced urbanists

(if not the populace) that property values were not appreciably affected in the long run by ghetto expansion and that the caricature of neighborhood decline is a popular myth as opposed to reality. It is possible that the caricature of urban decline of older cities in the United States is a similar myth based, in part, on similar grounds.

THE METHODOLOGY

Urban age for the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) of the United States was defined as the difference between the year 1977 and the year in which the central city reached a population of 25,000. Because the census data on population are recorded decennially, projections of the intercensal year were made by a linear interpolation of growth rates. A series of demographic, income, and employment variables were chosen as dependent variables to be included in simple correlation and regression analyses for the SMSAs and for politically-defined central cities.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The most significant demographic characteristic of older cities to emerge from these preliminary analyses is that older central cities tend to have a higher percentage of black population than do younger central cities. Consider the 1960-1970 net migration statistics shown in Table 1 for counties selected as sites of major older American cities. The degree of racial transition in these selected areas is intense. This racial transition is a probable factor in the propagation of the urban decline myths much as it was the dominant factor in the decline of the neighborhood sentiments following ghetto expansion.

That racial transition is strongly related to urban age is a central part of the urban age myth. To test this myth hypothesis 1 postulates:

1) The percentage increase in black population is positively related to urban age. The hypothesis is not statistically supported since urban age and the percentage change in black population 1960-70 for central cities is strikingly insignificant (R^2 = .003). Thus while older central cities have a significantly higher percentage of black population than younger cities, this percentage is not changing overall. Thus racial transition is a factor related only to large Northern cities and is not directly related to urban age itself.

Older cities have significantly larger population than younger cities as would be expected. However, the rates of population change are less than expected. Given the "there goes the city" sentiment and the selected migration rates of Table 1, it was expected that there would be a strong negative relationship between population change and urban age, i.e., that there would be strong empirical evidence of an exodus from older cities. To test this aspect of the urban age myth hypothesis 2 postulates:

2) Population decline is positively related to urban age. While some evidence for this exodus hypothesis does obtain, it is much weaker than expected (R^2 = 0.07 for SMSAs and R^2 = 0.10 for central cities).

INCOME AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE CHARACTERISTICS

The myths of urban age might instill a belief that older cities might be in a worsening economic condition relative to the allegedly more

TABLE 1

NET MIGRATION FOR SELECTED COUNTIES (SITES OF OLDER CITIES) 1960-70

COUNTY	STATE	WHITE	NEGRO & OTHER RACES
Cuyahoga	Ohio	-117,215	30,171
Cook	Illinois	-333,948	116,147
Wayne	Michigan	-374,948	99,918
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	-238,977	34,575
Essex	New Jersey	-123,307	52,889
Kings	New York	-458,846	173,412
Bronx	New York	-242,035	150,970
Suffolk	Massachusetts	-134,559	24,970
Milwaukee	Wisconsin	-126,995	21,306
District of Columbia		-135,665	35,758

dynamic younger cities. To test this aspect of the urban age myth hypothesis 3 postulates:

3) Median family income is inversely related to urban age. Once again, the empirical evidence does not support the myth. There is no relationship between median family income for whites and urban age in central cities (R^2 = .0067). For SMSAs, the relationship between urban age and mean employee wage and median family income for whites is in fact positive, though weak. The relationship between urban age and median family for blacks is also positive and slightly stronger. This may in part be due to higher percentage membership in labor unions in older cities, although data to test this hypothesis were not readily available. Nonetheless, one vital sign of economic health, i.e., wages and incomes, appears to have no strong relationship to urban age.

An intuitively more tenable hypothesis of the urban age myth is that

4) Older cities have a greater percentage of their employment in manufacturing. This might indicate an economic disadvantage since the general shift of the national economy has been away from the primary manufacturing sectors and into the tertiary service sectors of the economy. The initial results are counterintuitive. Using census breakdowns of employment by major sector, no significant relationships (at the 95% significance level) obtain between urban age and the percentage of the total labor force employed in manufacturing (R^2 = .056), as production workers in manufacturing (R^2 = .041), in retailing (R^2 = .001), or in selected services (R^2 = .039). A weak positive relationship did obtain between urban age and the percentage of the labor force employed in the wholesaling sector (R^2 = .096). The overall pattern indicates

that the economic sectoral makeup does not vary with urban age.

This result is somewhat surprising in that older cities did grow during a more industrially-based era and that this industrial base is characteristically immobile. Perhaps a factor that the propagators of the urban age myth neglect is that the older cities were and still are centers of innovation, integrally linked into the urban hierarchy, and are thus capable of adapting the innovations involved in the economic sectoral shifts as are the younger cities. Another vital sign of economic health, i.e., economic structural diversity, appears to have no significant relationship with urban age.

SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS

One final hypothesis of the myth of urban age is that:

5) Older cities are more underbounded than younger cities. If hypothesis 5 is true, older cities are subject to a less viable tax base. Again the empirical results controvert the myth. The relationship between urban age and the land area of central cities (R^2 = .0064) and SMSAs (R^2 = .0036) is remarkably insignificant. Further, a significant relationship does obtain between population density and urban age both in central cities and in SMSAs. Thus it might be speculated that older cities enjoy an advantage relative to younger cities in terms of tax base. Given that there are no differences in incomes or land area, older cities (or urban counties) with larger and denser population concentrations may enjoy certain agglomeration economies and scale economies in the provision of public services expected in return for the tax dollar.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions which can be made from such preliminary research indicate that many of the myths of urban age may be unfounded. This initial check of the economic health of older cities indicates that they may be more robust than expected.

Further research into aspects of urban age is warranted. It is quite probable that the myths of urban age are based on urban size or regional differences as opposed to urban age itself. It is hoped that further research into urban age will yield more definitive insight into the vitality of older cities.

NOTES

1. Exceptions to this statement are the works of Schnore (1972), Hollingsworth and Hollingsworth (1972), Williamson and Swanson (1966), Barabba (1975), Greenberg and Valente (1975), Sternlieb and Hughes (1975), and Berry (1975). Of these studies only the first three used urban age as an explicit variable.

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